

TURNING POINT



STEVE DALE

was a reckless 21-year-old determined to have his own way, until an accident forced him to rehabilitate his body and life. Now the 42-year-old smiles in the face of change

In February 1989, I was working as a barman in Melbourne after dropping out of teacher training in Brisbane. I'd taken a day off to go to Phillip Island with friends. We drank a few beers with lunch and, afterwards, I decided to scale a cliff face. It was a stupid risk but, back then, I lived a life of showing off, trying to prove myself.

The agony was driving me insane. Plus, the brain injury left me with amnesia and confusion. But I realised I didn't want to die, because I'd never really lived or been truly happy.

I decided that if I were to live, it had to be independently.

And I didn't want to be the angry and intolerant person I'd become. I wanted a complete turnaround.

My recovery was slow. I had to undergo physiotherapy, memory classes and extensive speech therapy. I was finally sent home from hospital after eight months.

At that point, I couldn't read, write or speak confidently. I had extreme difficulty managing things most people take for granted. For example, what do I need to take out of the fridge to make breakfast?

How do I choose which clothes to wear? These insignificant rituals were overwhelming.

But I was determined to get better. That was the start of 10 more years of rehab – going to the gym and attending weekly physiotherapy, chiropractic or massage sessions.

By 31, I knew I was as good as I was going to get, mentally, physically and emotionally. Now you'd only know about my accident and condition if I told you.

During my recovery, I secured odd jobs, but most of them didn't last. My brain and body couldn't keep up with the demands. I didn't

have anything on my résumé, so it was hard to find long-term work.

The only way I was going to have a decent future was to build my own business. In 2002, I set up a professional speaking and business training company, Smiling Tiger.

I help individuals and companies achieve their goals. Not being confident with my speech enabled me to learn to listen to people and understand their needs.

I still live with a constant level of pain, but it's manageable.

I don't talk about it, which drives my parents and fiancée nuts, but I don't want people to see me in only one light – as a person who lives in pain.

I'm grateful my family and friends stood by me even though life with me was very difficult after the accident. During the first few years, I had to fight to discover who I was and what I was meant to do with my second chance.

My fresh start was dramatic, but my real life started on the day of my accident. It was both the worst and the best day of my life. One of the problems with making changes in our lives is that we wait until everything is perfect, but it's never going to be; you just have to make a start. **HELEN HAWKES**

Steve Dale's autobiography, *Bouncing Back When You Hit Rock Bottom*, will be released next month. Visit www.smilingtiger.com.au.